

The Connect Project Audio Documentary

Intention

To document the story of The Connect Project with an audio first approach, using sound as the vehicle for storytelling. Re-interpret the highly visual story, and support its telling using footage captured for the film documentary. This is to act as a stand-alone piece, separate from the final documentary film, to offer an alternative method of engaging with the story for our audience who may not want to engage with screens, including blind and low-vision individuals.

Unique Considerations

- **Integrating Film Footage:** How to use audio footage from the film to inform and enhance the storytelling. Our goal is to use little to no artificially created sound effects and as much audio content from the film itself.
- **Visually Rich Film:** There are many detailed visuals in the film, as it pertains to the connection between two visual artists and their physical creative output. How do we produce the same sensory impact without being able to see the work?
- **Equity in Perspectives:** One of the protagonists of the film communicates primarily through ASL, therefore not using her voice. How do we ensure that the perspectives and stories of both protagonists are represented when one cannot communicate through this format?
 - In response to the above, how do we approach casting the actor to read Jenelle's words when she cannot hear their voices? (If dialogue is to be read)
 - Although Jenelle does not communicate by using her voice, she does vocalize. There are certain sounds she is or is not comfortable with having included in the footage. Sensitivity and agency around this form of representation are particularly important, as it also happens to be invisible.

Team Composition

While there were specific responsibilities dedicated to each person, the goal was to work collaboratively and invite team members to fill in the gaps where needed, such as writing and editing support, and providing audio for scratch recordings of draft scripts.

- **Direction:** Kanika, one of the Co-Directors of The Connect Project and protagonists of the film, provided creative direction. Kanika has a sensitivity to screens and prefers audio-based media and communication.

This does create a complexity to the project where one Co-Director can guide this process while one has less ability to do so. To rectify this, we engaged Jenelle's input as much as possible. She gave direction on how she and her partner wanted to be portrayed, and we sent her scripts for her to approve and give notes. Both Jenelle and Kanika shared a short passage to describe their relationship to sound and how it affects their lives; this helped inform our writing process.

- **Writing:** We chose to engage the screenwriter of the film to be the lead writer. Due to her intimate knowledge of the film footage, having created a detailed transcript of the 30 hours of footage captured, she has the best understanding of the heart of the story of The Connect Project. Being an artist as well, we wanted to give her a chance to work in a more experimental and creative capacity for this specific project.
- **Team Support:** We involved the lead writer of the open audio descriptions for The Connect Project Documentary Film. They would be involved in editing the script and the creation of scratch recordings for draft versions of the audio. This person has a background in radio broadcasting and podcasts and was chosen due to his experience in storytelling for a mass audience.
- **Team Management:** The project manager from the open descriptions, who also works with Kanika as an assistant and access support, would produce the project. This person has a background in production and experience managing teams and working with people of different abilities.
- **Sound Design & Mastering:** We hired a sound designer for the project. This individual has made a career working in audio formats. Our sound designer is also Blind, and has experience working with audio description for film, and has a strong understanding of how to re-interpret visual work through audio. Due to a later change in availability, the nature of this person's role changed to one of a consulting capacity. We therefore completed the project with a different sound designer. This individual was not Blind or Low Vision, but also has extensive experience working in audio and would be able to complete the project to our timeline and needs.
- **Casting:** We had an open casting call for this project. We also reached out to some of the actors who had previously auditioned to read the open descriptions for the documentary film and asked them to audition for this. Our lead actor, who played "String," had also served as a consultant with lived experience as a blind individual on the open descriptions and had written and recorded tactile descriptions for all of the artefacts that were made by Jenelle and Kanika.

She had also expressed interest in reading for this character specifically. While this person's knowledge of the project was an asset, she was ultimately cast due to her ability to embody the character of String. Her voice best communicated the spirit of The Connect Project.

Development of Original Concept

Since we did not have the benefit of visuals to help paint a picture for our audience, we needed to find an original angle for telling this story in an audio format. This piece needed to tell the same story as the film, but stand alone as a piece, and not give any more or less information than the film. We wanted to explore an immersive and experimental approach to storytelling, focusing on analog methods of art and communication. The Connect Project's goal is to encourage communication and connection through physical art. The original connection was forged between Kanika and Jenelle, sending each other pieces of mail, and so the analog was the base on which we would build. We started with the idea of tuning into a radio station that was doing a segment on the story of the Connect Project. There would be interruptions of commercial breaks, a call-in segment, and different hosts, all focused on the idea of access and connection. The idea was to create an immersive world to pull the viewer into, a sort of aspirational alternative world where access is the norm.

We wrote a script and made a scratch recording with sound mixing to take to a focus group to test out the idea. Our focus group was made up of a diverse selection of individuals, some of whom have experience working with or using audio-based media and audio access features.

Focus Group Key Takeaways:

- Find a singular method of telling the story, having too many formats (radio, commercials, call-ins, etc) becomes overwhelming and hard to keep track of.
- If you are going to have different segments, have clear transitions between each.
- Identify each voice and make sure to cast actors whose voices are very distinct from each other.
- Keep the focus on analog methods of art and communication. This resonated deeply with many of the participants, particularly the advertisement for the mail.
- Find the tone of the piece. Make sure it's consistent and clear to the audience so they understand how to engage.

- They want to hear from Jenelle and Kanika. After being told so much about them, the participants wanted more of an opportunity to be invited into their world.
- The recording that we showed to the focus group was meant to be played in stereo, however, we did not have the capability to control this over Zoom. The audio that the group listened to was not accurate to what had been created and as a result affected the participants' experience of the piece. Ensure all required technical aspects are supported and working when soliciting feedback.

July 12 Focus Group Notes

Deliberation

Until this point, our team was working remotely, some working in different time zones. We felt it was necessary to bring everyone together in person to decide on the next part of the process. It was important to have everyone in the room at the same time, especially since we were going to be creating a new concept from scratch. We met up in Toronto for a few days to process all of the feedback and plan out the next steps of the project. The focus group Facilitator and the Connect Project's Research Assistant were both present as well to provide additional insights and support.

It was clear from the focus group that we needed to cut down our concept and find a singular method of storytelling. We chose to lose the idea of a radio station entirely and focus on the art pieces themselves and the journey of the packages between Jenelle and Kanika's homes.

The participants wanted to be able to "hear" from Jenelle and Kanika, but seeing as Jenelle does not communicate through speaking, it would not be equitable for Kanika's voice to be used on the recording when Jenelle's would not. Instead, we chose to have the story told from the perspective of the craft items used in both of their art pieces. String was a prevalent material, used in every piece, so that became the protagonist. It could speak to the experience of being in both Jenelle and Kanika's homes, which would give insight into each of their characters.

The focus group participants particularly loved the advertisement we wrote encouraging people to use the mail. So we decided to make a mailman one of the characters of the story. This character could serve as a call to action, inviting listeners to engage in their own "connect project".

Implementing Feedback from Focus Groups and Team Meetings

- **Simplify the narrative:** Create a new script based on the changed concept of “String” using the characters of String, Clay, the Mailman and the Narrator. This would involve creating new scratch recordings to test how it sounds read aloud.
- **Continue the conversation:** We worked with several consultants who are blind, sharing scratch recordings with them to get feedback on how the story was registering. These consultants had also worked on the open descriptions for the film and so would be able to compare the two projects to confirm if we were successful in translating the story to this new format.
- **Collect the audio footage:** Our sound designers pulled audio from the footage captured for the documentary to use in the piece to provide additional storytelling context and create a stronger connection with the story.
- **Learn from our protagonists:** We asked Jenelle and Kanika to provide us with a description of their relationship to sound, and what sounds in their home environments are like. Kanika verbally described her environment, while Jenelle produced a “day-in-life” field recording. This was to be used as part of the writing and sound design to create a clearer picture of each of their lives. We could use their own words to help illustrate their lives to our audience. We also recreated a sense of the sounds of their respective homes as a way of immersing the listener in each of their worlds. Both subjects were able to review and provide feedback on the draft scripts to confirm they were happy with their portrayal.
- **Create an equal narrative:** From the beginning, we knew there would be a challenge with how to represent both Jenelle and Kanika’s stories equally in an audio format, because this is not the way that Jenelle can communicate. To create equity in the storytelling, we chose not to hear directly from either subject. Instead, we created the anthropomorphic character of “String” to be our guide. Both Kanika and Jenelle use string in all of the art that they created and shared, and its symbolism as a connector, something that ties things together, spoke to the theme of this project.

Key Challenges

- **The freedom and limits of experimentation:** Our task was to create an experimental audio piece and our team was given a very open-ended prompt. Almost too open-ended because it was difficult for us to find a place to start. We had to create our own limitations for the project to help give it focus.

If you don't know the rules of the game, then you can't know which ones you can or cannot break.

- **Delayed sound design:** Our original goal was to conduct the script writing and audio production side-by-side so that the dialogue and sonic environment created in the piece would work together for a more holistic result. Due to unforeseen conflicts in availability, we were unable to start work on the audio mixing until after the script was written and the dialogue recorded. In our final product, the SFX responds and adds emotion and texture to the piece, but does not do any storytelling itself. The final product does not use non-verbal sound as the primary storytelling device, as we had aimed for.
- **Visuals to Audio:** Translating the content of a visual piece of art into audio. The Audio Documentary is meant to be separate from The Connect Project Film Documentary, another method of telling the same story. It needed to live on its own, but it could not contain more or less information than the film. One audience cannot be privileged to more information than another, which is very challenging when the information is presented in very different ways.
- **Connecting with both protagonists:** The focus group participants wanted to be able to hear from both Jenelle and Kanika, but since Jenelle does not communicate through audio methods, we needed to find a way to invite our audience to get to know both of them equally.
- **Using audio footage from the film:** While we did end up using a good amount of audio clips from the film footage, we did have to incorporate artificial sound effects as well. Particularly when it came to noise captured part of the background, like bodies in movement, sounds of crafting, and exterior noise. The footage from the film was not clear enough for these sounds to be distinctive without the support of a visual signifier. Our sound designer ended up sourcing some sound effects to use in these places to ensure clear communication.

Outcomes/Features of the Final Documentary Product

- **Completed Production:** "String" Audio Documentary included as a standalone output of The Connect Project. This piece is read by a cast of voice actors and accurately tells the story using an audio-first perspective. This work addresses one of the unique considerations of this project, ensuring equity from what is 'heard' directly from both protagonists of the story.
- **Film Footage:** Audio footage from the documentary film was incorporated into the piece, demonstrating that it is possible to use film footage in an audio context.

- **Transcript:** A detailed transcript of the recording, including music and sound effects, is included to accompany the piece.

Final Lessons and Takeaways

1. **Engage the sound design as early as possible:** This work must be done in tandem with the script. Each must inform the other's development through the project. If the sound is included too late, then it works mainly as a reaction and supplement to the storytelling through dialogue, instead of being an essential part of the story itself. If you plan to use audio from another piece that you are going to create, such as we did with the documentary film footage, plan ahead. Ensure that in the production process of the source material that you know what elements you need and that you are capturing clean audio footage of everything, not just dialogue.
2. **Ensure accuracy of the work when sharing it with audiences for feedback:** The fact that our piece was not played in stereo during the focus group ended up having a huge impact on the final product. The participants were overwhelmed by the different audio features in this draft and would have had an easier time digesting the piece and differentiating between the features if we had played it in stereo. We ended up completely changing our narrative approach after the focus group.
3. **Give your subjects a chance to review and contribute to the work, even if they cannot engage with the final product:** We ran our written draft scripts by both Jenelle and Kanika. Kanika was able to hear the spoken audio versions, while Jenelle could not. However, Jenelle had the opportunity to review scripts and provide direct insight and information to the team to confirm her portrayal was accurate and something she was comfortable with. Kanika and Jenelle also wrote passages about their experience with sound and captured field recordings of their homes to share with the team, which helped inform our script.
4. **Find alternative methods to connect with your subjects beyond having them address the listener:** By creating the character of “String”, inspired by the consistent use of this material throughout all of Jenelle and Kanika’s artwork, we were able to tackle the challenge of equity in perspectives. Participants in the focus group wanted an opportunity to hear from/connect with both protagonists more directly, but this would not be possible for Jenelle in an audio format. Through the perspective of String, we could explore the world of each of our subjects in a more balanced way.